

ARBELLA'S BABY

A Jacobean Mystery

by

MARGARET MARTIN



This, in *Exodus*: ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.’

Such a text was an article of faith in England once, for without a witch to work his venom that old serpent Satan was bound to languish in his sulphur pit, a scourge to none but himself. But with the aid of an ally, so it was held, he was ever amongst us, sowing iniquities, harvesting common folk to his cause.

And this too was accepted: that a witch went out of her house in her own shape, but could assume another likeness if that were fit to the devil’s plans. She would oft appear to a passer-by in the guise of a dog, or a cat, or a toad, or come wrapt in a cunning mantle as a sweet-talking maid, overripe with blandishments.

To the faithful, such was the blindness of our estate, the force of our appetites, that neither the commandments of God, nor the laws of our realm, nor the neighbourly love attested to in King James’s newly published Bible could make us straighten up; until suddenly, on some otherwise peaceful day, Satan’s spirit, that has no bodily form, but for a witch, would make its dire presence felt.

If a household be crippled by death, or a member of it brought low by uncanny illness, Satan’s hand was first suspected. In such a case, the friends of the innocent were advised to confront the apparent perpetrator, subject her to a test, and thus submit the remembrance of their wrongs to that heavenly power that suffers not iniquity to pass unrevenged.

The accused was to be taken to a mill pond; and there, having shut the gates that the water might be at its highest, they were to cross and bind the arms of the one in doubt, strip her of her smock, but leave her legs at liberty, and throw her into the water. And yet, if she not be a witch, that such a one might not be at risk of drowning, let there be a

rope about her middle, so long that it may reach from one side of the pond to the other, whereby if she chance to sink, those at either end might draw her up and preserve her, for she that sinks will be innocent. But if she swim or float, she must be taken up and searched by the women for any unnatural marks.

If such marks be upon her, let her be bound a second time, and having her right thumb tied to a left toe, with your men and the same rope (if need be) to preserve her, she must be thrown into the water again, for if then she float or swim, you may build upon it she is a witch.

Whereupon, brought from the water, if the accusers be law abiding, the practice was for the one accused to be then examined for her misdemeanours, before Magistrates in the main, but in notable cases, at the inception of the Clerk of Appearances, in the Court of Star Chamber.

You must dwell upon these old times and practices as I, Thomas Hobbes, after many years in exile, acquaint you with the mystery that bedevilled my youth, and came close to breaking my spirit; a puzzle that came upon me in this way.

It was customary upon the feast of St Bartholemew the Apostle and like occasions to erect tents upon the green at Clerkenwell for sports and pastimes: wrestling, juggling, archery, and more. Here, the officers of the precinct, namely, the bailiffs, sergeants, yeomen, porters of the king's beam and others of prowess, were challengers of all men in the suburbs, to wrestle with each other, and on the vacant ground nearby, to shoot the standard arrow and compete for prizes.

And so it was, on such an afternoon, that one custom intersected with another. For stewards of the shooting match, in search of targets, had gone off to commandeer tubs and barrels from adjoining houses. Imagine, then, their panic, the horror of it, after struggling to upend a water-butt, when a dead woman, half-naked, was suddenly glimpsed, and came toppling out.

She came at them like a thing possessed, they said. She slid out of the barrel in a rush, all legs and feet, and finished up flopping on the

ground before them like a dead white seal. There, in the silent courtyard, lying in a puddle: a corpse.

It was gruesome. Her cold flesh. The swollen, ashen face. Her hands and fingers were lacerated as though she had been struggling to free herself, yet otherwise she bore no sign of injury. So the oilskin pouch found with her was snatched up and searched for poison, a clue of any kind.

She was known to her neighbours, of course, the dead one, and known principally for this: not so long ago she had been a maid to the Lady Arbella Stuart, that notorious lady of royal blood in the house of Tudor. A claimant to the throne.

But news of the dead maid's identity was quickly overtaken by the murmuring that then arose. For one of the archers, with a feverish voice, drew attention to the way in which the deceased woman's arms were bound across her chest. The bruises below suggested that a rope had been tied around her middle.

'Afore she were hidden,' he surmised, glancing fearfully at the faces around him. 'She been dunked in a pond for a witch.'

'Aye,' another whispered. 'For to see if she sink or swim.'